

Research Brief #4: The Value of People, Place and Possibilities: A Multiple Case Study of Rural High School Completion

IMPORTANT QUOTE:

“In comparing the viewpoints of teachers in higher- vs. average-performing schools, we noted some distinct differences in their expressed individual and collective efficacy in supporting youth to achieve a high school diploma” (p. 9).

What is this study about?

The researchers were interested in comparing the distinguishing features of rural schools that had significantly higher graduation rates to those with average graduation rates. The researchers set out to answer the following question: What are the qualities of classroom, school, and district processes and practices in rural high schools with higher than average graduation rates? They conducted the study by comparing the viewpoints of teachers in schools with high graduation rates to the viewpoints of teachers in average graduation rate schools.

WHAT’S IMPORTANT?

The researchers approached this study from a socioecological lens. They noted that the qualities of practices and processes in classrooms, schools, and districts, and their relationships to children and families in the communities they serve, are central to understanding academic outcomes, including graduation rates.

THE DETAILS OF THE STUDY

Participants/Methods and Procedures

This multiple case study of rural high school completion included six schools. It was noted that the challenges facing the schools were largely consistent with those described in the literature about rural schools across the United States and internationally (e.g., declining property values, resources, and enrollment). The researchers noted that they selected a multiple case study method because it would facilitate the comparison of different data sets. This method would also allow focused attention on the contextual conditions that were important to the research question. Four of the schools had significantly higher than average graduation rates and two had average graduation rates. Data was collected through 63 interviews with administrators, teachers, and specialists (e.g., guidance counselors, special education teachers, social workers, school psychologists). School documents were also collected, including items such as school improvement plans, curriculum maps, lesson plans, classroom assessments, and teacher evaluation information.

Results

“The findings from this study suggest that better graduation outcomes in the sample of higher-performing schools, relate to a climate of high expectations and alignment of practices and processes to reach those expectations” (p. 13). The researchers listed several important contrasts between the two sets of high schools relating to: (a) the qualities of academic goals, expectations, and learning opportunities; (b) the nature of individual and collective educator efficacy; (c) the strategies educators used to develop and maintain family relationships and engage community members; and (d) mechanisms for adapting instruction and employing

interventions for students at risk of dropping out. The researchers noted that the “features of practices and processes, which distinguished the higher from the average performers, appear to be intertwined and mutually supportive” (p. 13). For example, “individual and collective efficacy manifested in a proactive approach to setting goals and aligning programs and practices to meet those goals. This process required reaching out to families and helping them to understand the need for and benefit of programs that would help their children to meet state requirements for graduation and potentially be better prepared for college or career” (p. 13).

Educators’ individual and collective efficacy made a difference in these schools. In the higher-performing schools, teachers spoke of taking risks to innovate and meet students’ learning needs. Administrators in these schools noted that teachers were receptive to new ideas. In the lower-performing schools, teachers “described feeling that they had done all they could do” (p. 9). The researchers noted that the sense of efficacy and engagement had been extended to educators’ relationships with families and community in the higher-performing schools.

Limitations

One limitation of this study is that it was based on a small sample size and therefore, may not have “revealed all the nuances that a large sample of rural schools, and one that investigated rural schools with especially low graduation rates, might have revealed” (p. 12). Transferability of findings may also be limited since the schools were situated in a Northeastern state with characteristics that may differ from other rural communities. Furthermore, the study design did not include observations in classrooms, or data from parents and community members.

Citation

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